

Professional staff in education becoming more visible and knowledgeable - Connecting the dots to shed light on their community, identity, and the relations with academics

Susi Poli

University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper sets out to shed light on educational staff in professional services in today's universities, moving from this group investigated in a multi-campus Italian university.

This group of HE professionals has recently gained visibility from the renewed status of education as set by the European strategy in early 2022, with this strategy prioritising education as much as research.

Through 15 semi-structured interviews, the paper sheds light on their search for a community, their identity, but also on the network of relations with academics.

In conclusion, educational managers feel to belong to a plethora of communities; they know that their identity is crucial to the understanding of themselves and their roles; in addition, they have their say not only on the complexity of today's education but also on the relations with academics, never enough explored in research, with this becoming the topic they wish to discuss even further.

Full paper

Today's higher education is a very complex working environment. Overall, the role of education in universities has progressively changed in recent years moving from a second-row mission to a frontline core in the space of several years. This trend is confirmed by a new European Strategy for Universities released in January 2022 that has openly called for establishing synergies between Education and Research, while breaking down silos between Education and Research missions, and also for breaking down existing silos between University offices.

Educational managers are under pressure these days. To be noticed that the educational managers are part of the wider community of HE professionals as those described by Whitchurch (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010), Gornall (2009), Middlehurst (2010), Gordon (2010), Barnett (2008), Deem et al (2010), Harland (2012), Henkel (2010) to be intended as the overarching community of those performing a variety of functions in today's HEIs.

Methodologically, through a data collection and a thematic analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews, the paper discusses the main findings depicting this professional group.

Community

This sense of having a community was instead less clear and unique for educational managers that provided a wide, varied set of responses (Unibo, the school, faculty, or even the informal community of practice gathering those in educational services locally). The reasons for this varied set of answers could be several, for example, the 10-year waves of university reform and restructuring going on at Unibo; but also, the feeling of not having a unique organisational culture or the proximity to a more familiar group; or also the strong commitment to the entire university and its culture, including the prestige of being in the public sector and doing a social role anyway; and possibly the certainty that a previous model of organisation for educational services, for example under a

School, could have been preferred. Or someone pointing out that “they feel to belong to Unibo, that’s it”, to state that there is only one institution to first all belong to or perhaps only to avoid the thinking about the many more communities they may feel to belong to.

The point on community and people’s belonging to one can easily be connected with the one on identity, which is what we explain in the following section.

Identity

Identities for staff in professional staff have been further explored by Whitchurch (2008a, 2008c, 2008d, 2013), Henkel, (2010), Poli (2013), but also for RMAs by Shelley (2009), Allen-Collinson (2009), Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2009), among others.

Educational managers showed to have a good grasp of the answer for the majority of those interviewed.

Respondents feel to be like facilitators, servants of education, core players in education, and/or also those acting as joining links. This latter meaning is more often intended as the joining link between the university boards and Senate and the departments, who sits in between and make the dialogue between the two sides understandable to each other. An extreme view also depicts these managers as the punching balls of educational settings” to stress their role at all times in between opposite sides or groups.

Relations (or tensions) with academics

Tensions with academics are seldom reported and expressed by the minority of respondents. Someone dares to say that “Tensions cannot be lacking because there is no communication from both sides [meaning here from the professional and the academic side]” (Respondent MV).

“I am here, count on me and on my provision of support services! Whilst they [academics] look astonished and cannot grab the potential of our high level of support, including the provision of data and information” (Respondent CR).

In conclusion, educational managers feel to belong to a plethora of communities, from the institution to the educational school, and from an informal group of educational experts to their faculty; however, their views are not unique but varied and so they do not feel to support any collective identity.

Regarding their identity though, they know that this is crucial to the understanding of themselves and of their roles in the institution; for this reason, they depict their identity as the joining piece that helps connect the university boards and the departments (operational units and staff).

In addition, on the relations with academics, they report how these relations are seldom used completely and this only makes educational managers more frustrated with the unexpressed full potential of their support; this relationship, however, has been never enough investigated, and on the contrary, this should become the topic they wish to discuss even further.

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